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Boehlert renews push on automakers for improved gas mileage

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WASHINGTON — Rep. Sherwood Boehlert has been fighting for years to persuade his colleagues in Congress to force automakers to build cars, SUVs and light trucks that go farther on a gallon of gas.

Now, as lawmakers scramble to do something about soaring gas prices and angry voters, the New York Republican and chairman of the House Science Committee believes he may finally win.

Boehlert plans to offer legislation that would require automakers to increase the average gas mileage standard for their fleets of cars, SUVs and light trucks from 25 miles per gallon to 33 mpg over the next 10 years. A vote on the proposal could come as early as next week.

By 2025, the plan would save 2.6 million barrels of oil each day — or about 12 percent of the oil now consumed in the United States.

In an interview with Gannett News Service, Boehlert — who is not seeking re-election — talks about what's at stake for Americans.

Question: Why do you believe that raising gas mileage standards is the best solution for high gas prices?

Answer: This is the only realistic way to provide near immediate — not overnight — but shorter-term relief. And the consumer would be the big beneficiary because they would be able to buy vehicles that require less stops at the corner gas station, fewer \$60 fill-ups, and leave more money for the balance of their family needs.

Q: Americans seem to have a love affair with SUVs. Will your bill mean that they won't be able to buy them any more because they guzzle so much gas?

A: People like SUVs because they're big enough to carry kids to the Little League game or take their family on a picnic. I don't want to take SUVs away from people. I just want them to have the choice to buy a more fuel-efficient SUV. The consumer demand is there. If you look at the numbers, sales figures for GM, Ford and Chrysler are down while sales for Honda and Toyota — which make more fuel-efficient vehicles — are up.

Q: Opponents of your proposal argue that making vehicles more fuel efficient can only be done by sacrificing safety to make smaller, lighter cars. Is that true?

A: No. That's an outdated argument that has been disproved by the National Academy of Sciences. Even the vice president of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers testified before my committee that that isn't true. So we're going into this battle armed with facts and the opponents are armed with the same tired old arguments that have been disproved over the years.

Q: Why haven't you been able to pass this bill before?

A: Well, we're not short of issues demanding our attention. We've got the war on terrorism, we've got Iraq, we've got the economy, we've got so many issues. So most people (in Congress) haven't really focused on this subject. But we've got their attention now with \$3-a-gallon gasoline and constituents demanding that we do something about it.

Q: What do you think of the idea that has been floated by Senate Republicans of offering Americans a \$100 "gas rebate" check?

A: I think it's one of the goofiest ideas I've ever heard of. That's only going to cost \$10 billion. Ten billion dollars! Talk about pandering. Looks to me like somebody is just trying to buy votes. Why not go all the way; why not offer \$1,000 checks? That would be a lot more attractive, and that will only cost \$100 billion. That's so transparent. People can see through it. That doesn't address the problem.

Q: Some lawmakers have called for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or relaxing environmental regulations on oil refineries as possible solutions. Why don't you agree?

A: I don't want to do something to address one problem and create another problem. I sort of think the American people feel they're entitled to have government action that will protect the water we drink and the air we breathe. And while we're on a crisis on the price of gasoline, we shouldn't just say, "Well we've got to lower the price so we'll forget about these environmental regulations ... and public health."

Q: Are you counting votes for your bill? Do you know how you're doing so far?

A: We're gaining all the time. I have had any number of colleagues who have said to me, in essence, "You know I haven't focused too much on this issue in the past, so I just went along with the majority position because it seemed reasonable." Now they're saying, "Man, am I focusing on this issue." (Republican Rep.) Mike Castle of Delaware, who has never voted for it before, now is co-sponsoring it.

Q: You aren't seeking re-election. But for your colleagues who are, do you think this will be an issue in their races?

A: I would hope that constituents across America will take their members to task if they fail to recognize this opportunity to deal in a meaningful way with a national security

issue of the highest order. And that issue is: Can we continue on our reckless path being so dependent on foreign-source oil to fuel our economy? The answer to me is clearly no.